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ABSTRACT

As more emphasis is placed on helping children gain a global perspective and understanding of the world, children's literature seems to be a natural vehicle for fostering that understanding. By studying the storyteller, educators can learn about literary traditions of communities, particularly traditions which reflect the use of stories. An explanation of West African minstrels' traditional use of the story can be shared with children and adapted for use in a classroom setting by hanging fishnets from a corner of the classroom where all sorts of items are hung. Children can choose an item which brings to mind a favorite story to share with the class. Children can become storytellers and take their stories from classroom to classroom in a way similar to the East Indian tradition, using story cloths to present stories through pictures. By identifying the original tradition and history of the storytelling technique, children learn about the value and use of stories from other cultures, and teachers can avoid the use of these traditions as merely another gimmick to capture children's attention. (MG)

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# Sharing Stories: Multicultural Traditions

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## SHARING STORIES: MULTICULTURAL TRADITIONS

Children's literature has long served as a vehicle for understanding and vicariously experiencing cultures and traditions different from one's own. When asked to remember books read during childhood, adults recall a sense of satisfaction at being able to identify with and experience vicariously the lives of characters in settings different from their own as the adults recall traveling to various countries or cultures through early experiences with literature (Imdieke, 1989).

As more emphasis is placed on helping children gain a global perspective and understanding of the world, children's literature again seems to be a natural vehicle for fostering that understanding. When studying various cultures, similarities and differences are often noted between the culture being studied and our own. One similarity which frequently surfaces is the important community role of stories and of the storyteller. In looking beyond the similarities, however, one can notice uniquenesses within cultural groups as to how the traditional storyteller gained the attention of the audience, prepared the audience for listening, and proceeded to share stories.

By studying the storyteller we can learn about literary traditions of communities, particularly traditions which reflect the use of stories. Through examining authentic storytelling traditions, we can 1) discover ways in which multicultural understanding can be enhanced through our use of these storytelling techniques in a classroom setting as we present these authentic storytelling traditions to children, and 2) encourage children to respond to literature in a variety of ways (Rosenblatt, 1983; Hickman, 1979) by finding ways in

which these traditions can be adapted and used by children.

## AUTHENTIC TRADITIONS

One such authentic storytelling traditions is described by Mary Kingsley, an anthropologist studying Buana minstrels of West Africa in the 1800's, Kingsley (1964) tells of West African minstrels who allowed the listener to select a story to be heard by choosing an object hanging from a story net. The minstrels would frequent the market towns and sing stories for a fee. Each had a story net made out of a fishing net on to which were tied "all manner and sorts of things, python's backbones, tobacco pipes, bits of china, feathers, bits of hide, birds' heads, reptile heads, bones and to every one of these objects hangs a tale." (kingsley, 1964) The buyer would select an item and haggle over the price of the tale with the minstrel. When agreement over the price of the tale was reached, the story would be told or sung.

An explanation of this traditional use of the story can be shared with children and adapted for use in a classroom setting. Fishnets can be hung from a corner of the classroom where all sorts of items can be hung from the net. Holiday tree ornaments sold commercially are small enough to hang on the story net, and many items bring to mind favorite children's stories. For example, a small red bike brings to mind Curious George Rides a Bike, and a train engine reminds one of The little Engine that Could.

In the classroom, children can choose an item off of the story net, and based on that item, a story can be shared by the teacher or children. The choice might be a trade book that connects in some way to that item, a poem or a folktale told orally, or a story written by one of the children.

Children can contribute to the story net by drawing or making items to hang on the net. Personal nets can be made from netting in which fruits and vegetables are often sold and children can draw or create their own items to hang from their personal net.

Examples from literature also support an understanding of the story net tradition. Evidence of this story net tradition can be seen in A Story A Story. Anansi, the familiar spider figure and trickster of African tales, uses a net to capture the animals in the story so that the stairs (again made out of net) can be climbed to the sky where Nyame holds the precious box of stories. Although this net is used differently in this story, children can be guided to see the connection of the use of the net in both the story and the authentic tradition, both of which have roots in the African culture.

Knots on a Counting Rope presents one aspect of storytelling in a Native American setting. A young boy asks to hear the story of his birth and his adventures from his grandfather. The young boy is blind and the stories help his see and remember the events of his life. A knot in the counting rope is tied each time the story is told and the grandfather say, "Now, Boy, now that the story has been told again, I will tie another knot in the counting rope. When the rope is filled with knots, you will know the story by heart and can tell it to yourself."

In this tradition, the counting rope has been used as an aid in memorizing a personal story passed on from grandfather to grandson. Family stories are often shared and passed on from one generation to anther, and as children try to learn these family stories, or even learn stories from literature to tell to others, counting ropes can be used to record the number of times the story has been told.

Nesting dolls-- dolls that fit inside one another-- have also been used to tell

family stories. Pellowski (1984) writes that these kinds of dolls seem to be about 100 years old, but may be traced to the Japanese nesting boxes first found in Europe around the 19th century. Pellowski tells of Slavic storytellers who used the nesting dolls, or matrioska dolls, to introduce stories by saying, "My great grandmother told the story to my grandmother who told the story to my Mother who told this story to me." (Pellowski, 1984) The concept of nesting dolls are currently being used to represent traditional folklore such as a set which was designed to portray the tale of The Three Little Pigs .

Pellowski (1977) presents another tradition, the East Indian storytelling tradition, which uses pictures as storytelling prompts. Traditional Indian stories were often epic tales for which illustration could be presented through pictures on scrolls or large tapestry cloths. The tapestries could be spread out to help the storyteller recall the events of the story and help serve as illustrations for the story. Children quickly understand how cumbersome carrying many books and pictures would be for the traveling storyteller who probably walked many miles from village to village. Children understand how much easier and lighter travel becomes when carrying only a piece of rolled-up cloth.

Children can become storytellers and take their stories from village to village, or from classroom to classroom, in a way similar to the storytellers of the East Indian tradition. These story cloths have been created by children to represent two familiar folktales. The illustrations are created using crayon and marker on toweling. This activity works particularly well in cooperative groups as children plan and decide which parts of a story need to be illustrated so that the story can be told from the cloth. Children also gain a sense of story as they learn about the sequence of story events and the importance of a strong story sequence

or structure to aid in the illustration. The use of story cloths may also encourage children to try oral storytelling with the use of the story cloth as a prompt.

When an authentic tradition is shared with children, the original tradition must be identified and the history of the tradition must be shared with the children. In this way we learn about the value and use of stories from other communities, and avoid the use of these authentic traditions as merely another gimmick to capture children's attention.

## CONCLUSION

Sharing authentic storytelling traditions with children can contribute to their learning in several ways.

* These activities can help to develop children's multicultural understanding and appreciation. As we share these traditions, children learn about the uniqueness and value of each cultural tradition.

* An understanding of storytelling traditions may motivate children to learn more about a particular culture through an investigation of other community traditions.

* The sharing of these traditions motivates children to attempt storytelling on their own. The use of the traditions may serve as visual aids or prompts to give children confidence in their initial storytelling attempts.

* These traditions can become springboards for addition ideas or ways in which children may want to choose to respond to literature.

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